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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S RASHT VALLEY: TEN YEARS AFTER PEACE

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11. SUMMARY: Ten years after the civil war, citizens of Rasht Valley endure gloomy times as corruption and economic decay have stifled democratic progress. PolOff met with government officials, religious leaders, nongovernmental organization workers, and local civilians during a visit to Rasht Valley. The following profiles the lives of Rasht Valley residents ten years after the Tajik civil war. END SUMMARY.

A DECADE OF PEACE, BUT NOTHING TO CELEBRATE

12. Ten years after the end of the Tajik civil war (1992-1997), residents of Rasht Valley, the former hotbed of opposition, are not celebrating and are doing little to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the peace accords. The general consensus during PolOff's June 13-15 visit is that the people are thankful for peace and stability, but there is little more to celebrate. Mustafo Azamov, a human rights lawyer with the nongovernmental organization Nihol said that he would rather forget about the war and wants his children to forget about it too. "How can I explain to my children the story of brothers fighting each other?" As Azamov notes, "The democracy we anticipated came through suffering and pain."

13. The list of grievances Azamov ticks off is familiar and includes corruption among government officials and a faulty justice system that deprives people of real legal protection. In the past year Azamov has seen his organization's caseload expand tenfold growing from 112 to over 1,000 applicants, the bulk of the cases concerning women's rights. This reflects the success of his organization in educating citizens on their legal rights such as property rights and human rights. It is also an indication of the growing challenges women face. Prior to his organization's work, nearly all of the cases processed through the Rasht District court were handled without lawyers.

14. In June 2006, President Rahmon visited Rasht to mark the ninth anniversary of peace and stability. As the result of his visit, the center of Garm, the main city in the valley, received a few shiny new buildings. One year later, however, little else has improved. With jobs scarce, the men have fled to Russia for work. The Chinese roads under construction promise to connect the isolated region with the rest of the country, but Azamov worries that the roads will bring in competing Chinese goods, including produce, Rasht's leading export.

POLITICS AND RELIGION CAN'T MIX

¶5. PolOff met with Odinamahmad Ashurov, an alumnus of the U.S.-funded Community Connections exchange program. Ashurov is constructing a madrassah for boys and girls next to Garm's largest mosque. In addition to religious courses, he plans to implement a curriculum of math, science, English language and computer skills. After his exchange to the United States, Ashurov hopes to transform the region's mosques into centers that help the impoverished and needy, like U.S. faith-based centers.

¶6. However, the people of Rasht know well that religion and politics don't mix - that is, they are not permitted to mix. Qurbon Barotov, Garm's Imam-khatib, a Muslim religious leader who leads large Friday prayer sessions, told PolOff that government employees monitor his sermons to ensure that his message is not political. Ashurov and Barotov both noted that mosque attendance among youth has increased. The leaders welcome the youth presence in the mosques, and feel that it is an opportunity to teach the next generation a message of tolerance and to actually encourage them not to get involved in politics.

¶7. In a meeting with political party leaders from the Islamic Renaissance Party, the Democratic Party and the People's Democratic Party, it is clear that the president's People's Democratic Party dominates, just like everywhere else in Tajikistan. Representatives of the other parties, perhaps intimidated by the presence of the People's Democratic Party, rarely spoke. The Democratic Party representative only raised his voice to say, "We support what you have heard from the People's Democratic Party." During the week of June 11, Muhiddin Kabiri, Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party visited Rasht and party officials hope that his visit will spur increased membership. But the residents of Rasht are daily

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reminded of the consequences of the civil war, which have left them increasingly isolated and shunned by Dushanbe, and have little appetite for politics.

BACK TO RASHT- A FORMER REFUGEE'S STORY

¶8. Many residents of Rasht are actually returnees from Afghanistan where they fled to escape the civil war. Sulaymon Huseynov's story is typical of other Rasht Valley residents. Huseynov's family, originally from the Rasht Valley, was forcibly relocated to the Khatlon region in the 1930s during Soviet rule. He grew up in southern Tajikistan and knew no other home. When civil war broke out in 1992, as a Tajik from Rasht living in Khatlon, Huseynov was on the wrong side of the fence. Forced to flee or risk being killed at the hands of his neighbors, Huseynov gathered his family and headed for Afghanistan. He crossed the Amu Darya River by dismantling a truck and floating on its tires. He and his family were among the lucky ones who survived. Many died trying to cross the river. Huseynov described how the river ran red with blood as soldiers shot hundreds of refugees trying to escape. Once in Afghanistan, life was no better. Although the Taliban left the Tajik refugees alone, the Tajiks lived under constant fear among the Afghans who all owned weapons. Huseynov moved around toiling at odd jobs in Kunduz, Kabul and Mazar-i Sharif.

¶9. In 1997 after the civil war ended, Huseynov returned to Tajikistan, but like many other returnees, he was too scared to go back to his home in the south. Instead he relocated to Tojikibod in Rasht Valley, his family's ancestral home. But he did not receive the warm homecoming he anticipated. Upon returning, he learned that his family's home had been occupied by other Tajiks, possibly militia. Urged by his family not to pursue a legal claim for the property, Huseynov had to start all over.

¶10. Huseynov now works for a microfinance organization in Jirgatal, a neighboring district. He grows his own vegetables and raises chickens to help feed his family. When asked how life has changed in Tojikibod he was pensive, "Life is better, because there is peace."

¶11. Tojikibod is the home village of Mahmadruzzi Iskandarov, the imprisoned chairman of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, who is also seen as an opposition politician. Despite his tarnished status many people in Tojikibod still respect him and appreciate the financial assistance he provided to the town prior to his imprisonment.

USAID ASSISTANCE: EMPOWERING WOMEN, SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS

¶12. Of the various residents PolOff met, only one group could concretely describe how life has improved since the end of the civil war -- and not only because "there is now peace."

¶13. USAID's support for Mercy Corps Development Assistance Program has not only fed, but also educated and empowered women. Mercy Corps staff trained a network of volunteers in various skills from building greenhouses to personal hygiene. Volunteers then go out and train others in the community. To date, nearly 4,000 people in the region have benefited directly from the project.

¶14. PolOff visited three women-headed households who are beneficiaries of Mercy Corps' U.S.-funded projects. Each of the women was grateful to the United States and Mercy Corps for the assistance and enthusiastic that the projects have given them a way to sustain their livelihoods. One commented that thanks to the United States, "From the earth to the sky, life is better." The women told PolOff about how their husbands have left for Russia and do not send home money, leaving them destitute. All of them live in mud-brick homes thatched together with straw, and sleep right next to the chickens and goats that roam their yards.

¶15. With Mercy Corps' greenhouse project, trained volunteers teach the women how to build greenhouses and raise vegetables. The women are now able to feed their families, sell the vegetables for profit, and can the vegetables for winter. The women told PolOff that thanks to information from the community volunteers, their children are vaccinated, women no longer give

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birth at home, and they seek professional medical assistance. All the women in the village see a doctor at least once a year and they all pool their money together in case one needs a medical procedure -- an effective form of health insurance. According to the women all this has resulted in fewer illnesses among the community. In addition, they are optimistic that their children will have better lives. All of their children now complete high school, including girls.

¶16. COMMENT: Viewed by Dushanbe as the "losers" of the civil war, the Rasht Valley feels like it has received only token assistance from the central government, and its isolation means that few international organizations and non-governmental organizations are able to reach out to the area. The people are managing to slowly build civil society on the foundation of ten years of peace. The biggest challenge for Rasht now is building industry and creating jobs in order to sustain the peace. END COMMENT.
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